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Indexing



Vincent le Blanc as the Second Non-Muslim in Makkah and Madinah

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Abstract

Societies and nations generally construct their worldviews and strive to realize their religious and political objectives in the light of these worldviews. Christians of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries began to explore the world and discovered new continents. They disseminated their views related to the peoples of the world, especially the Muslims, through their travelogues and books. It is generally acknowledged that the books published from the national pedestal are always biased. Hence, the analysis of books that are politically and religiously oriented is a very important task. Keeping this purpose in view, this article discusses the case of Vincent le Blanc as the second European non-Muslim to visit Makkah and Madinah. It argues that, in reality, the man never did as he claimed. The visit was staged mainly for the interest of Christian anti-Islamic polemics. The justification of this contention is two-pronged. Le Blanc's fallacious, self-contradictory and irrational accounts of Makkah and Madinah, their holy mosques, and of *haji* rituals are scrutinized. It is followed by bringing to fore his extensive plagiarism of the work of Ludovico di Varthema. The findings of this study suggest that the books written by tourists such as Le Blanc are characterised by biases and alienated approaches. Therefore, their propositional as well as linguistic material should always be viewed cautiously to safeguard against their misleading contents.

Keywords: Vincent le Blanc; Makkah and Madinah; Ludovico di Varthema; Christian anti-Islamic polemics, biases

Introduction

Vincent le Blanc (1554-1640), a French traveller, explorer and adventurer, is believed to have been the second European non-Muslim who visited Makkah and Madinah and recorded his journeys as well as impressions. The first one was Ludovico di Varthema (1470-1517), an Italian traveller and explorer.

The 16th and 17th centuries in Europe signified a time when the Age of Discovery, or the Age of Exploration, was reaching its peak. Extensive foreign explorations created a craze and a vogue on the continent. A compelling desire to globetrot and explore overseas

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places arose in many people and became a potent feature in European culture ever since. It perhaps never fully died out.

The sentiment is best described by the words of Le Blanc: “Life is but a continual voyage, without rest or assured habitation.”¹ That is, the whole life is a journey of discovery, within and without, and the whole earth is a home.

The newly discovered Americas were beckoning. Africa and Asia were coming to be ever more familiar and accessible. Marco Polo (d. 1324), Christopher Columbus (d. 1506), Ferdinand Magellan (d. 1521) and Vasco da Gama (d. 1524) became household names. They became national and international heroes.

Literally, there was no end to dreams and hopes. Opportunities abounded, yet were infinite. Excitement was in the air. As Ludovico di Varthema wrote in his travels that the “testimony of one eye-witness is worth more than ten heard-says.” Exploration and travel ensured “most deserved and high praise from others” and abundant personal satisfaction.²

Circumnavigating the globe and realizing its full extent helped man contemplate more closely and more systematically his place – and role – on that globe. Mapping out the world and bringing it closer to home was affecting people’s thinking and feelings most profoundly.

The developments were changing everything. With the world better discovered and better known, new world-views were likewise formed. Scientific spirit was growing irrepressibly, destroying mercilessly all the false idols of the mind, faith and tradition. Novel modes – and results – of thinking and values were taking over as a new religion, which was bent on conquering the entire newly-discovered globe (world).

Without doubt, the planet, earth and life on it were set never to be the same again. The greatest anomalies thereafter were the unknown, the old-fashioned and the sluggish, in the realms of thought, standards and things, and the greatest enemies, both at the individual and collective (institutional) levels, were those who opposed such avant-gardism and evolution.

This article analyses Le Blanc’s claimed feat of visiting Makkah and Madinah, arguing that the man - in actual fact - never visited the two Islamic holy cities. Everything was fabricated mainly for the agenda of Christian anti-Islamic polemics. To substantiate the perspective, the study explains how erroneous, superficial, contradictory and irrational Le

¹Vincent le Blanc, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travailes of Vincent le Blanc*, translated into English by F. B. Gent (London: Printed for John Starkey at the Miter, 1660), see the author’s Preface.

²Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, translated into English by George Percy Badger (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1863), 1-2.

Blanc's descriptions of Makkah and Madinah, their holy mosques, and of *hajj* rituals, are. For the same objective, the study also demonstrates how extensively Le Blanc plagiarized Ludovico di Varthema, who was the first Christian in Makkah and Madinah.

2. Who was Vincent le Blanc?

Le Blanc was born at Marseilles in 1554. His father, Raphael le Blanc, was a rich merchant who frequently traded in the Levant (a region on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea north of the Arabian Peninsula and south of Turkey, which includes present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and most of south-east Turkey). The father was a joint partner in a ship that was used for trade activities with the East.

Le Blanc's case epitomized the restlessness and excitement of his age. He was its ambassador, so to speak. As a child, he had the strong desire to travel and see the world. He called it "a noble ambition." The desire "was kindled by life in the great French port, where he watched the arrival of strange ships manned by foreign sailors, or the departure of others for those Eastern cities whose very names breathed mystery and enchantment."³

The magic of the East was overwhelming and the spell seductive. He could not control it anymore, and at the age of almost fourteen ("I was not fully arrived at my fourteenth year of age") "he left his home and embarked secretly upon his father's ship bound for Alexandria. His mother knew of his intentions, but recognised the futility of opposition."⁴

After visiting Alexandria and Cairo, things did not go as planned on the homeward voyage. The ship arrived in Candia (Crete) where, due to a delay, the crew misused and squandered the merchandise. On leaving the port, they were "beset by fear of creditors and conceived the desperate design of wrecking the ship."⁵

Le Blanc escaped the disaster and returned to Candia in a small boat. He stayed there six or seven months with the Consul of the "French Nation." Then he met an acquaintance from Marseilles who had just arrived from Venice in a Venetian ship bound for Jerusalem. The acquaintance's name was Cassis. The man proposed that Le Blanc should follow him to Jerusalem, which was accepted.

Earlier, Le Blanc had vowed a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to give God thanks for his preservation in the last great danger (the shipwreck). The Consul

³Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca* (London: William Heinemann, 1909), 29.

⁴Ibid., 29.

⁵Ibid., 29.

advanced Le Blanc money for the trip. He did so – and all the other things – for Le Blanc’s father’s sake, whose friend and acquaintance the Consul was.⁶

The master of the said Venetian ship was also from Marseilles and knew Le Blanc’s parents. He was amazed at seeing Le Blanc, saying that he had recently attended his funeral at Marseilles. Le Blanc’s parents had announced that their son had been cast away with the rest of the company (ship crew) and had died, and they bore his loss heavier than that of the ship.

On the way to Jerusalem, Le Blanc and Cassis arrived in Syria first, where Cassis met Murat, his brother and a renegade who had accepted Islam and so, “had sinned in denying Christ.” The latter mooted the idea of visiting Makkah for the approaching *hajj* (pilgrimage) season, albeit “not from religious motives, but that he might sell his merchandise at a profit and recoup himself for recent losses.” After that, they could go to Jerusalem.

Both Cassis and Le Blanc were unhappy and unwilling, but accepted the suggestion nevertheless, the former because of his brother’s insistence and the latter because he feared for his wellbeing.⁷

While visiting Makkah and Madinah, where the trio was preoccupied solely by the commercial side of *hajj*, Cassis hatched a secret plan to separate together with Le Blanc from his brother Murat the renegade. They took with them six camels loaded with goods that belonged to Murat. Cassis did that, robbing his brother of substantial merchandise, because of Murat’s religious treason and rejection of Christ.

Cassis explained that since his brother had denied Jesus Christ he did not deserve those (goods), “and thought it fitter to make them his own, and resolved to see the world at his charge and expenses.”⁸ Whatever conscientious scruples, as a result of this dishonest act, may have been felt by Le Blanc, they “were silenced by necessity.”

According to the plan, Cassis and Le Blanc travelled to Jeddah whence they took ship “for Aden and thence for Ormus. Having sold their goods at great profit in Persia and Babylonia, they journeyed as far north as Samarkand. They subsequently returned to Aden, travelled up the east coast of Arabia, visited India, and many other countries in Asia and Africa. In 1578, after an absence of ten years, Le Blanc returned to Marseilles. His parents did not recognise him.” Many years ago, they had celebrated his funeral obsequies or rites.⁹

⁶Vincent le Blanc, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travailes of Vincent le Blanc*, 3-4.

⁷Ibid., 9.

⁸Ibid., 17.

⁹Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, 32.

Le Blanc travelled even more from 1583 to 1602. He visited the Americas, Spain, Italy, Malta, Guinea, and the West Indies. Later he composed a book about all his travels and adventures. The book is titled, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travailes of Vincent le Blanc*. The book was not published until after its author's death. It was translated into English by F.B. Gent and was published in London in 1660. The author died in 1640. He was eighty-six.

3. Le Blanc's Trip to Makkah and Madinah a Reality or a Fiction

At the end of his exposition of Le Blanc's story, Augustus Ralli in his book, *Christians at Mecca* placed a note: "Le Blanc's statements should be accepted with reserve. Many are inclined to dismiss the account of his journey to Mecca as fictitious."¹⁰

All things considered, the author truly seems to have fabricated his visit not only to Makkah, but also to Madinah. He did not go there, but managed to invent and dramatize things, subsequently grafting them onto the body of his actual travels.

This can be substantiated by the following observations.

Le Blanc's accounts of Makkah and Madinah are very superficial and full of errors and contradictions. So much so that one understands almost nothing therefrom about the two holy cities, their holy mosques and other holy sites, as well as about *hajj* rituals. Moreover, one gets utterly misinformed and misguided, which by no means was supposed to be the object of the travels and of the book that issued from them.

3.1. In Madinah

To begin with, the author says that Madinah was formerly known as Jesrab, "a town with good waters, for which cause it is well peopled," but then immediately says that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was born at *Jetrib*, or Meka. At another place, he says that the Prophet (SAW) was born "at Itrarib, or Jetrib, a small village now called Meka, or near unto it." He seems to be confused as to the fundamentals in relation to the two holy cities and their respective identities.

The author then reveals that according to a widespread anecdote back home, the Prophet's (SAW) tomb, which was all of iron, was either in Makkah or Madinah and was suspended in the air with a loadstone. He debunks the error by affirming that the Prophet (SAW) had certainly died in Madinah and had been buried there, "where to this day his tomb is frequently visited by Mahometan pilgrims from all parts of the world, as the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem is visited by Christians."

¹⁰Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, 33.

However, he does not say so as an eyewitness, nor do his statements ooze the confidence of one. Rather, he states that he had heard – not seen - all that for certain. After that, some factual inaccuracies follow, which even a casual observer in the Prophet's (SAW) mosque in Madinah, would not, under normal circumstances, accommodate. He says that the Prophet's tomb is built of white marble together with the tombs of Abu Bakr, 'Ali, 'Umar and 'Uthman, in their capacities as the Prophet's (SAW) successors. At the same location, there were books or biographies of their lives and also of their sects or opinions "which are very discrepant." There were a great number of lamps always lighted there as well.

He furthermore says that the Prophet's (SAW) tomb is three steps or thereabouts in ground; the steps were white marble. Which is as much incorrect as it is merely conjectural, for the interior of the Prophet's tomb is inaccessible and hence, unknown. One certainly wonders how the author failed to notice the obvious - for example that 'Ali and 'Uthman were not buried next to the Prophet and that books of their lives and their sects could not be there – but knew the impossible.

As reported by Joseph Pitts, an Englishmen who in 1680 as a slave who ostensibly accepted Islam visited Makkah and Madinah: "There is nothing of his (the Prophet's SAW) tomb to be seen by any, by reason of the curtains round it, nor are any of the Haggas (pilgrims) permitted to enter there. None go in but the Eunuchs, who keep watch over it, and they only light the lamps, which burn there by night, and to sweep and cleanse the place."¹¹

Richard Francis Burton (d. 1890) further reiterated, commenting on Joseph Pitts' observation: This account is perfectly correct. The Eunuchs, however, do not go into the tomb; they only light the lamps in, and sweep the passage round, the Sepulchre."¹²

All this is followed by two statements which, to all intents and purposes, are sheer forgeries and were meant but to insult both intelligence and Islamic faith. The author says that a Turkish priest and scholar (jurist) informed him that formerly the Prophet's (SAW) body had there reposed, but later the angels had transported it before God to assist Him at his great judgment. Secondly, he says that "the Turks believe to this day that the tomb hangs in the air" and they wonder very much when informed to the contrary.¹³

¹¹Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, edited by the author's wife, Isabel Burton (Dover Publications; Volume 1, memorial edition, 1893), see Appendix V.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Vincent le Blanc, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travails of Vincent le Blanc*, 12-13.

Suffice it to say that no regular Muslim, let alone “the Turks,” ever believed that the Prophet’s tomb at any time hung in the air. Joseph Pitts noted: “I never heard the Mahometans say anything like it.”¹⁴ Nor did any normal Muslim ever believe that the Prophet’s body had at any point been taken to God to assist in matters of His judgment. Not only is all this unreasonable and preposterous, but as well blasphemous. If that was always the case with respect to any ordinary Muslim, one might ask how Le Blanc was able to find a Turkish scholar and jurist (priest) who knew and preached what nobody else did. And that priest allegedly operated right inside the Prophet’s city and inside his mosque as the enduring citadel of Islamic orthodoxy.

3.2. In Makkah

That is basically all Le Blanc writes about Madinah. After that, he shifts focus to Makkah. His reports about the latter are slightly more prolific, but are simultaneously more ambiguous, more deformed and so, more misrepresenting. As a fraudster, the more he said, the more he exposed himself and his designs. He was desperate to authenticate his instance, but failed miserably.

About Makkah the author writes that it was two days journey from Madinah, which, according to Augustus Ralli, was “of course impossible.”¹⁵ The city was pretty large, of the quantity of Rouen, or twice as big as Marseilles. It was surrounded with great and steep hills, which served her for defence and made the access difficult. There were abundance of merchants and very rich. To facilitate the passage from the plain, there were four avenues cut through the mountains, easy to be maintained.

The *hajj* season is called a famous yearly fair “which they (Muslims) call their Jubilee.” A very scant and muddled reference is then made to Arafat and its mountain of mercy, the sacrifice rite, the Mina site and the rite of throwing pebbles. For instance, a mention is given of pilgrims bathing with the Zamzam water as a symbolic gesture of washing away and pardoning their sins. Startlingly, that is said to be done officially and by the help of the ruler’s (*Sharīf*) deputy, following the rite of throwing pebbles at Mina. It is *Sharīf*’s deputy who “casts a pail of water upon their (pilgrims’) heads, wetting them from top to toe, which they hold a purification or expiation of their fins.”

It is moreover unclear why the author speaks about *hajj* rituals and prayers, and suddenly introduces the obligation of fasting, which has nothing to do with the existing context: “And when they keep their fasts they neither eat nor drink by day, but they eat all the next night.” The actual reason for that is that Le Blanc did not narrate his exact affairs

¹⁴Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, see Appendix V.

¹⁵Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, 31.

and experiences associated with Makkah and Madinah – nor could he, as he never visited them – but presented to his audience his subsequently fashioned perceptions and adjudications that fitted his, not scientific, but ideological patterns. Only some of those were pertinent to Makkah and Madinah per se.

The discussion then moves to the holy mosque of Makkah (*al-masjid al-harām*), and it is there that confusion and errors increase exponentially. Firstly the mosque is depicted as a mass of stones built round, and is immediately likened to St. Sophya (Hagia Sophia) at Constantinople.

In addition, at another place, as part of his discussion about Constantinople, the author does the same thing, adding that “the magnificent Church of our Saviour, S. Sophia at Constantinople, erected by Justinian, was of circular model by which pattern the Saracens built their temple, or mosque at Meca, though there is much difference between them, that at Meca being only brick building supported with abundance of pillars.”¹⁶

However, structurally there is extremely little that is common to the mosque of Makkah and Hagia Sophia. The former is a hypostyle building with a vast central courtyard in the middle of which stood the Ka’bah, while the latter is a classic example of a style whereby created vast spaces are covered by huge central domes. The author appears unsure in respect of the overall plan and architectural character either of the Makkah mosque or Hagia Sophia. Regardless, the two buildings cannot be bracketed together architecture-wise. What is more, in the first instance, the author says that the Makkah mosque was built of stones, but in the second, he says it was a brick building.

This only shows that the author did not see at all Makkah and its holy mosque. He was only guessing based on limited – and unreliable – information he could obtain. His accounts were his own constructs. Besides, he does not mention the Ka’bah whatsoever, though it signifies the soul and identity of the holy mosque. According to some authoritative jurisprudential views, the Ka’bah yet denotes the mosque itself.

A secondary and very common feature of the mosque is presented next, to the effect that one ascends into it fifteen or sixteen steps. Without and round about it are built fair piazzas, or galleries, where “the merchants keep their exchange and expose to sale their drugs (medicines and spices), perfumes, jewels, and several other sorts of commodities.” To the author, parenthetically, the Makkah and Jeddah – the latter being the former’s gateway – are commercial havens. Hither Makkah, where the richness of India is attracted, flock via the port of Jeddah all merchants from all parts of the world. “The road between

¹⁶Vincent le Blanc, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travailes of Vincent le Blanc*, 306.

Ziden (Jeddah) and Meka is very full of merchants, they carry their merchandizes upon camels: some bound for Syria others for Egypt and from thence for Europe.”¹⁷

Thenceforth, Le Blanc’s exposition of the mosque of Makkah (*al-masjid al-haram*) takes an abrupt turn for the worse. He delivers some irrefutable proofs that he never entered Makkah and Madinah and never witnessed their holy mosques. His reports are plain nonsenses.

He says that the Christians are not admitted into the mosque; they view it only through the gate in disguise. Needless to say that the author should have known that both Makkah and Madinah were sanctuaries (holy cities) and as such, were completely inaccessible to non-Muslims. In the European perspective of the day, the cities were more jealously guarded than the Holy Grail, where “no white man, European, or Christian, could enter (save as a Moslem), or even approach, without certain death,”¹⁸ and that “so effective in theory has been its (Makkah’s) seclusion that no confessing adherent of any creed but that of Islam is known to have seen its sanctuary since the Hijrah and lived.”¹⁹

Johann Wild, a German who was imprisoned in a war and sold into slavery to a series of Muslim masters and who ostensibly accepted Islam, also said after performing *hajj* in 1607 with one of his Muslim masters that a Jew or a Christian found within the city of Makkah would be burnt alive.²⁰

How Le Blanc and his Christian acquaintance Cassis effortlessly made it into Makkah - and Madinah – where they freely and nonchalantly moved around and attended to their business needs, and where they learned - and apparently witnessed - that Christians were not allowed into the mosque, but could view its interior through the gate in disguise only – is somebody’s guess.

At that juncture, inexplicably, the author again brings up the issue of the Prophet’s tomb – having discussed the matter merely three pages before within the framework of his reports concerning the city of Madinah and its holy Prophet’s (SAW) mosque. (In passing, Le Blanc arrived in Madinah first, whence he proceeded to Makkah.)

But the tomb is now in the mosque of Makkah, clearly seen as soon as one entered the mosque proper “upon your left hand in the middle of his (the Prophet’s) two sons in law.” “To visit it, you descend three or four steps; yet it is generally believed that the tomb is

¹⁷Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁸Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, see the “Preface to the memorial edition.”

¹⁹David George Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1904), 64.

²⁰Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, 38.

empty (for it is a Muslim belief) that the angels translated his (the Prophet's SAW) body into heaven." The last comment is roughly a reproduction of an earlier comment in the course of the discussion of the Prophet's (SAW) mosque in Madinah and the same Prophet's (SAW) tomb in it. There is then a vague reference to a little turret which was richly decorated. It was at the end of the same side where the tomb was situated. In the turret, the treasure belonging to the governor of Makkah was kept.²¹

Supposedly, the turret could be an elevated structure that housed the treasury, like the famous dome of the treasury in the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. However, no such an institution was reported to have existed either in the Prophet's (SAW) mosque in Madinah or in *al-masjid al-harām* in Makkah. Once more, this could only be one of the author's fantasies invented along the lines of what he had seen elsewhere, especially in Damascus.

The following is an additional description of the Makkah mosque, which nevertheless is unclear, causing one to wonder if the author, in point of fact, speaks about the Makkah mosque or the Prophet's (SAW) mosque in Madinah. In fact, the depiction is very general and customary, and could be applied to any substantial mosque almost anywhere in the Muslim world. There is no single detail or feature that is peculiar to the holy mosque of Makkah.

The author writes: "A little further within stands an altar without any figure, and at each side are twelve books sumptuously bound; all the pillars are hung with rich tapestry, very fair and of lively colours, but without the figure or image of any animal... The mosque is most gorgeously adorned, and hung with tapestry without any imagery works, you descend unto it eighteen or twenty steps." The mosque is larger in compass than the Colosseum at Rome.

Then again, whenever the author intends to say something particular and distinctive of either Makkah or Madinah and their respective mosques, he inevitably errs. He for example further states about the "magnificent" mosque of Makkah that it was dedicated to the name of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), which nevertheless is true only of the mosque in Madinah correspondingly called the Prophet's mosque (*al-masjid al-nabawi*).

In addition, apparently referring to the Ka'bah's black stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*), the author writes that Muslims "give great reverence to a stone called Alkible, or Aliete, which they adore, and relate a thousand fables of it." Apart from not naming properly the revered stone, nothing is likewise said about the meaning, history, location, significance and role of the same stone, due to which the remarkable respect is attached to it. This way, this piece

²¹Vincent le Blanc, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travails of Vincent le Blanc*, 16.

of information not only does not enlighten at all, but also increases one in perplexity and suspicion.

Finally, Le Blanc also claims to have seen in Makkah “in the sultan’s seraglio (palace or court) a unicorn.” He was fully aware of the gravity of his statement, for unicorns were popularly regarded as mythical creatures, disclosing that he knew that many miscreants will doubt whether the world had such a beast. In order to strengthen his case and add credibility to his report, he emphasized that he saw yet more unicorns in India and at the Escorial in Spain, and that he was not the first person who had seen them. “I have read many grave authors that witnessed the same”, were the parting words of Le Blanc.²²

4. Plagiarizing Ludovico di Varthema

We have already mentioned that Ludovico di Varthema was the first European non-Muslim to secretly visit Makkah and Madinah and to record his proceedings, making Le Blanc and his case the second one. That means that, taking into consideration everything, at that time the European both intelligentsia and public could know extremely little about the Muslim holiest places. The condition was compounded by the fact that, generally, the 15th, 16th and 17th-century Europe was poorly grounded in knowledge about Islam, the Muslims and the Islamic culture as well as civilization. An aura of distrust, trepidation and resentment prevailed in the relationships between the two poles.

Moreover, it was one thing that Europe (Occident) had little to draw upon insofar as shoring up its relationships with the Orient as it was concerned, but the other and perhaps more painful thing was the verity that the existing few European scholarly references were fraught with prejudice, misconceptions and downright mistakes. Simply put, those were unreliable and inept, and if reviewed applying some basic scientific standards, they would not have stood a chance of making the grade. As such, instead of improving the relations and removing the obstacles, the contents of those references and sources worsened them.

Le Blanc was no exception. In no way could he know much about Islam and the Muslims in general, and about Makkah and Madinah in particular. However, since he did not visit the holy cities of Islam, but decided to incorporate their mention into his book, which aimed to exhibit his famous voyages and to prove that he had surveyed the world, Le Blanc’s options were limited. Having decided to compose a book, he must have realized that featuring Makkah and Madinah would increase his own profile and the profile of the book as well. He must have realized, furthermore, how much doing so would stir and, at the same time, gratify the burgeoning inquisitiveness and imagination of the restless European mind.

²²Ibid., 16-17.

In addition, Le Blanc was not known as an educated person. And how could he be when he embarked on his adventures at the age of almost fourteen? He was likewise naïve and uncritical. He often courted absurdities in the ways he saw and reported things. As attested by Augustus Ralli: “It had been his habit to write in a note-book all that he saw or heard. But his education had been of the slightest, and he was credulous. Many absurdities were found in his pages, and before they saw the light they were subjected to careful editing and numerous excisions.”²³

On account of all these factors, Ludovico di Varthema and his book, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India and Ethiopia, a.d. 1503 to 1508*, proved the best aid. Varthema’s exploits and experiences were legendary and his book one of a kind. They enhanced his reputation and cemented his fame. He was “a gentleman of Rome” and was knighted in recognition of his merit.

Varthema’s universal standing was Le Blanc’s inspiration, and his book, which was translated into French in 1556 when Le Blanc was two years old, a reference and guide. In his book he even twice explicitly mentions the name of Varthema, while trying to justify the feasibility of the existence of unicorns. However, Le Blanc clearly went overboard. He seems to have depended exceedingly, and perhaps exclusively, on Varthema’s accounts of Makkah and Madinah, the remainder being hearsays and his own mind’s eye. Indeed, his behaviour connoted a degree of plagiarism.

Substantiating the assertion of intellectual misappropriation, the following are the most striking similarities between what Le Blanc and Varthema recorded with reference to Makkah and Madinah, their holy mosques, and the pilgrimage of *hajj*.

First, they both arrived from Damascus (Syria), went firstly to Madinah and then to Makkah. After that, they travelled to Jeddah, whence they sailed elsewhere. This route was unconventional and was not followed by any of the subsequent foremost European non-Muslim travellers, such as Joseph Pitts of Exeter in 1680, Ali Bey in 1807, Giovanni Finati in 1811, John Lewis Burckhardt in 1814, and Richard Francis Burton in 1853. They all arrived by the Red Sea.

According to George Percy Badger, the translator of “The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema” into English in 1863 and the author of the book’s substantial “Introduction”, “among the few Europeans who have recorded their visits to the holy places of the *Mussulmans*, he (Varthema) is still the only one who has succeeded in reaching them by that route (that is, Damascus-Madinah-Makkah)... All (others) penetrated into the Hijaz and returned therefrom by the Red Sea.”²⁴

²³Augustus Ralli, *Christians at Mecca*, 32.

²⁴Ludovico di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*, see “Introduction,” xxvii.

Why George Percy Badger did not mention Le Blanc as someone who did the same thing as Varthema, is a mystery. But it is very likely that he was of those who believed that the man staged his visits to Makkah and Madinah, and that he mainly copied Varthema's subject matters.

Second, on the way to Madinah through the desert, both Le Blanc and Varthema speak about serious water crises and how they had to face the peril of robbers and toughs. Le Blanc additionally spices up his stories with spirits and phantoms.

Third, on the way to Madinah, they both speak about a hill where a sizeable population of the Jews lived. They were almost naked, except for their private parts.

Fourth, they both get it wrong when they say that besides Abu Bakr and 'Umar, 'Ali and 'Uthman were also buried with the Prophet (SAW).

Fifth, they both speak about books near the Prophet's (SAW) tomb, which deal with the life of the Prophet and the lives of his nearest companions. Some of those books also speak about the rife sectarianism of the Muslims.

Sixth, they both confirm that the Prophet (SAW) died and was buried in Madinah.

Seventh, they both reject a European fallacy that the Prophet's (SAW) tomb is suspended in the air.

Eighth, they both refer to another fallacy, to the effect that the Prophet's (SAW) tomb is empty, for his body was transported by angels into heaven.

Ninth, they both highlight that Makkah is protected by high mountains and that there were four entrances leading into the city.

Tenth, they both compare the holy mosque of Makkah (*al-masjid al-harām*) to the Colosseum at Rome.

Eleventh, they both point out that Makkah's mosque was constructed of bricks. However, as part of his confusion, Le Blanc in one context says that it was built of stones, but in another, he says it was a brick building.

Twelfth, while Varthema mentions the 23rd of May 1503 as the beginning of *hajj* (pilgrimage) season, which he personally witnessed and experienced in the year he was there, Le Blanc, on the other hand, mentions the same date, albeit as the fixed time for a famous yearly fair called the Muslim jubilee.

In passing, there is still a problem even with Varthema's date. The problem correlates either to the year or the month. If *hajj* started, as per Varthema's account, on the 23rd of May 1503, that corresponded, according to the most reliable calculations, to the 26th of *Dhul-Qa'dah* 908 AH, which is 11 or 12 days before the official commencement of *hajj*.

But if the date was the 23rd of May 1504 – which is one year later – that then corresponded perfectly to the 8th of *Dhul-Hijjah*, which is the official start of *hajj*. So, therefore, Varthema either miscalculated or misreported the *hajj* date of the year 1503, or he even might have misreported the year he commenced his travels and the year he arrived in Makkah and Madinah, which, when all is said and done, is the more improbable scenario.

Thirteenth, they both refer to the sacrifice ritual, as part of *hajj*, stating that its legitimacy stems from God's instruction to His prophet Abraham (Ibrahim) to sacrifice his son Isaac (Ishaq), as it is a Judeo-Christian tenet, rather than Isma'il (Ishmael), as it is a Muslim tenet.

Fourteenth, they both mention that there are multitudes of beggars in Makkah, who take advantage of *hajj*. They describe almost identically how those beggars cook and eat their sacrificial meat.

Fifteenth, they both speak about pilgrims bathing with the Zamzam water as a symbolic gesture of washing away (purification or expiation) of their sins. To both of them, that seemed an established Islamic ritual. However, to Varthema such came to pass following the rite of *tawaf* (circumambulation) around the Ka'bah, and to Le Blanc following the rite of throwing pebbles at Mina.

Sixteenth, they both claim the presence of unicorns in Makkah in the royal court. Varthema reported to have seen two, and Le Blanc one.

5. Le Blanc in the Service of Christian Anti-Islamic Polemics

Le Blanc purportedly visited Makkah and Madinah at his tender age. He did not know much at that point of time, nor was he opinionated. His actions were simply instigated by the tantalizing prospects of escapades, and were carried by his youthful spirit. His exploits represented a mixture of daredevilry, exhilaration, impudence and even foolishness. His true personality was shaped, to some extent, during the travels and, to a substantial extent, afterwards.

When one examines what and how he reported about visiting Makkah and Madinah, one understands that - apart from staging the episode – the whole thing was concocted later. Doing so was part, not only of modelling Le Blanc's subsequent personality, but also of expressing its mature character. Doing so, as well, was part of an agenda. It was an act of statement-making.

Le Blanc underlines in the "Preface" of his book – which was the last thing written of the contents in the book - that his accomplishments were due to divine providence (i.e., God and His intervention and guidance) and that he was always assisted by "this divine wisdom and goodness". Hence, he felt obliged to "at last produce something that may be

beneficial to my country and posterity.” And that is how a need for, and a purpose of, composing his travelogue were born.

How religious Le Blanc was is difficult to say, but obviously his cultural and patriotic awareness was strong, which nevertheless had to be deeply grounded in the Christian faith irrespective of how much that was recognized and appreciated. Thus, if he was not a devout Christian, Le Blanc must have been a cultural one. He might have been inclined somewhat to a form of religious nationalism too. This spiritual configuration was common in the Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries that was standing at a cultural and civilizational crossroads.

However, all that was regularly threatened by the “menace” of Islam and the Muslims whose torchbearers in Europe at the time were the Ottoman Turks. It is no wonder, therefore, that Le Blanc, and most of his contemporaries as well as predecessors, identified Islam with the religion of Turks, and the Muslims with Turks themselves. Islam posed a religious and civilizational threat. When the Ottoman power reached a climax and its soldiers were knocking at the doors of Vienna as a key gateway to Western Europe, they yet posed an existential threat to the continent.

Le Blanc must have been affected by the developments, directly and indirectly, which contributed significantly to the shaping of his personality and thought. It was nigh on impossible to be disinterested and unbiased, just as it was inappropriate to remain submissive and inert. Intense Christian anti-Islamic polemics - which were initiated as early as in the 8th century by John of Damascus (d. 749), and were elevated to unprecedented levels during the Crusades (1095-1291) and afterwards, in particular following the rise of Ottomans and the fall of Constantinople – played a role too. They proved at once handy and comforting. They were also gratifying. Making a contribution to and enriching them, for the sake of defending “country and posterity”, presented likewise itself as an enticing prospect.

In this manner - in all likelihood - a background for faking visits to Makkah and Madinah was formed. Le Blanc wanted to subject his vast experiences and “expertise” to the needs of Christian anti-Islamic polemics. He wanted to be a servant, supplying repertoires and facilitating targets. Because of that, he did not report about Makkah and Madinah, but instead wrote about them and the most essential things associated with them, befitting his new interests and agendas. As a result, in the case of Makkah and Madinah, Le Blanc did not function as a traveller and explorer, but as an ideologue, campaigner and bigot. In a way, he himself was a polemicist, widening thereby his appeal and popularity.

More specifically, as the birthplaces of Islam and Islamic civilization, Makkah and Madinah were used for articulating some of the most pivotal aspects of Christian polemics, including the originality and nature of Islam as a religion, the identity of Prophet

Muhammad (SAW), Islamic monotheism, the Muslims, the nature of the spread of Islam, and the originality of Islamic culture and civilization.

One can easily feel this intent as one reads through the author's narrations. Factual mistakes abounded and were tolerated because they were not the focus, nor preoccupation. The ultimate purpose was something else. The erroneous physical descriptions of Makkah and Madinah, accordingly, played second fiddle to the constructed ideological descriptions concerning them and the issues related to them. Authenticity did not matter; fabrication did.

6. Le Blanc's Contributions to Christian Anti-Islamic Polemics

The following are the most conspicuous aspects of Christian anti-Islamic polemics found in Le Blanc's travelogue and pronounced in the context of his fictional visits to Makkah and Madinah.

First, the Muslims were Turks. Thus, all of them, as long as they were the followers of Islam and Prophet Muhammad, were the enemies of Europe and all Christendom.

Second, the Christians who discarded their religious beliefs and became Muslims were renegades, that is, religious apostates or traitors. They committed the greatest sin by denying Jesus Christ. Referring specifically to the English travellers of the late 16th and 17th centuries to Ottoman territories, N. I. Matar said that they "were struck by the sight of Christians who had converted to Islam. These 'renegado' Greek, Arab, Albanian, Italian, Spanish, French and English Christians who had 'denied' their religion not only saddened the visitor but frightened him too."²⁵

Murat, Cassis' brother, is most probably a fictitious figure, created solely in order to draw attention to this particular point and its grotesqueness. Even though Le Blanc does not say much about or against Murat – but was concomitantly incensed at Cassis' betrayal of his renegade brother's trust placed in him – he subtly gets his intentions straight when he said that Murat had been compelled by force to become a Muslim and that he had resolved to leave the Turkish religion and culture and become a Christian again, "as we were." To Le Blanc, apparently, Murat needed to be pitied and saved. He was in need of spiritual rebirth.

Third, when Le Blanc refers to the people of Makkah – and all the people of that country – he calls them Saracenes. That was an ancient name for the Arabs and was later used for all the Muslims as "the other." To Le Blanc, however, Saracenes were the Arabs

²⁵N.I. Matar, "The Renegade in English Seventeenth-Century Imagination," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33, No. 3 (Summer, 1993): 489-505.

who at the same time were Turks (Muslims). In explaining the origin and meaning of the term, the author adds a new intriguing dimension.

Generally, there were two prevalent theories as to the name “Saracenes” (or Saracens). Firstly, dating back to the polemics of John of Damascus, the name is derived from “Sarras kenoi,” or “destitute of Sarah”, because of what Agar said to the angel: ‘Sarah hath sent me away destitute (empty)’.” This should be viewed against the backdrop of the fact that Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the Arabs and, by extension and metaphorically, all the Muslims are descendants of Prophet Isma’il (Ishmael), who was the son of Agar (Prophet Ishāq or Isaac, whose mother was Sarah, is the patriarch of the Jews and the Christians). Secondly, the name “Saracenes” is derived from the Arabic word “*sharqiyyin*,” which means “easterners”.

As far as Le Blanc was concerned, Saracenes were only the Arabs, and that suited him well, for his motivation was an exposition of the notions of the birthplaces of Islam, the prophet and Islamic character. He firstly says, in order to muddle the origins and history of the Arabs, that they were thus called because they originated from a shadowy town called Saraco. And secondly, he imparts that the name could be from the Arabic word “*al-saraq*” which means “stealing and living by robbery,” “as all inhabitants there have ever been great thieves and robbers”. Afterwards, the premeditated tag line follows, indicating the culmination of the theory: “Prophet Mahomet was born amongst them.”²⁶

Hardly surprising, therefore, that at the core of the Christian anti-Islamic polemics always resided the idea that the Muslims, in the main, were murderers, thieves and highway robbers who exalted nothing but destruction and bloodshed. The modern terms for the disposition are “terrorism” and “terrorists.”

Fourth, Muhammad (SAW) was a cunning, crafty and subtle impostor, as well as a charlatan. He was a false prophet, one of many the Bible repeatedly warns against. He cleverly hoodwinked people to believe him and to join his, not religion, but a mundane sect. Simply said, Muhammad’s (SAW) personal case and the case of his counterfeit sect deserved no consideration whatsoever.

Fifth, Islam is a plagiarized and manipulated religion. There is nothing original, nor truthful, in it. According to Le Blanc, the impostor-prophet Muhammad (SAW) from his youth started inventing his false law. “He took advantage of the discontents of some Sarazins (from the town of Saraco, hence Saracenes) that were not paid their pay by the Greek (Byzantine) Emperor Heraclius his officers, and made use of them to run over that Empire, with such success from the beginning that he undertook greater things... He gave

²⁶Vincent le Blanc, *The World Surveyed, or, The Famous Voyages and Travailes of Vincent le Blanc*, 14.

them a newer law, compiled with a mixture of their old one, making them believe, it was revealed and inspired into him from above, but which in truth he had forged and composed himself by the help of some Christian apostates.”²⁷

Sixth, Islam was spread by the sword and by the force of arms. Muhammad (SAW) forced all persons he could to receive his religion and his law (the holy Qur’ān). Endless deceptions and moral corruption played a role too. Le Blanc writes that “three principal means he (Muhammad SAW) made use of to establish his sect. First, of all sorceries, impostures and deceits. Secondly, of a liberty of conscience, sensuality and licentiousness. Thirdly, and lastly, of the force of arms.” Islam, it follows, is a “cursed doctrine.” It caused many diverse sects to sprout forth.²⁸

Seventh, Islam was initially followed by two apostate Christians, sword-cutlers and slaves. They were all very ignorant fellows (companions). That is how Muhammad (SAW) could fill his Qur’ān with fopperies (follies and absurdities) and impertinences.

Eighth, Madinah was the first town Muhammad (SAW) conquered and “reduced.” There he was “proclaimed king by his captains and officers.” He was succeeded by caliphs or heirs whose exclusive ambition, based on Muhammad’s earlier instructions, was to conquer Asia and Africa (the world) and to reduce them to their obedience.

That said, little wonder that according to the Christian anti-Islamic polemics, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his mission are normally depicted in the following manner – as exemplified in the writings of Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (d. 1320), an Italian Christian missionary and polemicist: Muhammad (SAW) was a heretic, enemy of Christ and a deceitful damned tyrant who became a prophet through robbery and tyranny; Muhammad was a robber, a murderer, a sinful man, the greatest criminal, a liar who blasphemes God in his Qur’ān; Muhammad was a cruel beast who with his followers aimed to conquer the world, destroy altars and churches, kill God’s saints and force them under torture to deny the faith; as the most ferocious beast, Muhammad was devouring the holy men of Christianity, and was a wicked and lewd blasphemer against God.²⁹

Ninth, as a mere aberrant sect whose people follow a false prophet, Islam and the Muslims are not given any credit at all. In all circumstances they are consistently downgraded and stripped of any religious or cultural significance and merit. That is to say, Islam and the Muslims are denied recognizable identity and so, any potential role in global history and civilization making processes. They are not in a position to offer anything new,

²⁷Ibid., 14.

²⁸Ibid., 14.

²⁹Rita George-Tvrtkovic, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2012), 138-173.

or valuable, to the world. Islam is projected as inferior to Christianity, and the Muslims and their culture inferior to the Christians and their own culture.

In addition to what has already been said, Le Blanc also equates mosques with temples, Friday with Sabbath (Mahometans Sabbath), and the *mihrāb* (praying niche) in the mosque with an altar. For the same reason, surely, he articulates that God instructed Abraham (Ibrahim) to sacrifice his son Isaac (Ishaq), rather than his other son Isma'il (Ishmael); that the holy mosque of Makkah (*al-masjid al-harām*) was built after the model of "the magnificent Church of our Saviour, S. Sophia" at Constantinople; that the Prophet's tomb is regularly visited by the Muslim pilgrims as the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem is visited by the Christians; that the purported physical and spiritual washing in connection with *hajj* was in lieu of baptism; that Muhammad's (SAW) tomb may be empty because many believe that, similar to the situation of Jesus Christ, his body was taken into heaven by angels; that Makkah was governed by a sultan or *Sharīf* who, similar to forgiveness of sins imparted by ordained Christian priests, "gives absolution to all that visit the mosque". With regard to the last point, when Le Blanc accentuated that the sultan or *Sharīf* was "their (Muslims') head both in temporal and spiritual affairs, and held in great esteem amongst them", he wished to draw a comparison with the Christian notion of papal primacy or supremacy.

7. Conclusion

Le Blanc is generally regarded as the second European non-Muslim to secretly visit the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. He did it during the *hajj* season, just like most of those who have ever accomplished the same feat, for it was on such occasions that best opportunities presented themselves. Tens of thousands of people from far and wide would throng the two cities, and the congestion, together with disorders often arising therefrom, would serve as an excellent distraction and disguise.

However, there is a serious question mark hanging over Le Blanc's accomplishment. Some insist that his accounts pertaining to Makkah and Madinah should be viewed with a great deal of reservation and scepticism, while others feel inclined to dismiss them altogether as fabricated. He might have never visited the two cities.

This study adopted the latter view. To justify and further corroborate the standpoint, the study explicated how flawed, superficial, self-contradictory and illogical Le Blanc's descriptions of Makkah and Madinah, their holy mosques, and of *hajj* rituals, are. The study also concluded that in his travelogue, the author significantly plagiarized Ludovico di Varthema, who was the first European non-Muslim to visit the two holiest places in Islam. And finally, the study shows that Le Blanc, in point of fact, operated in the service of Christian anti-Islamic polemics, regardless of the exact manner and scope of the involvement. At the end of the study, Le Blanc's direct and indirect contributions to Christian anti-Islamic polemics have been presented. Those contributions can easily be

gleaned from the content of his bigoted portrayal of Makkah and Madinah and of everything associated with them.

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